

The last word Arts censorship

by the editors

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As we move into the 1990s, it's more and more apparent that political struggle in the cultural area is heating up. Politicians get worked up mightily and get a lot of press mileage out of "flag desecration" rhetoric aimed at flag burning political protestors and artists who mock the sacred symbol. With a push for a Constitutional amendment, Congress tries to slap the Supreme Court's determination that flag burning is a form of protected free speech. And in yet another demonstration of the U.S. truism that commerce holds a higher priority than patriotism, no one mentions Old Glory used to highlight used car lots, 40x60 foot versions heralding car washes, or dirty and tattered ensigns flying at corporation sites.

Censorship in the art world again becomes a big issue, with the National Endowment for the Arts at the center of controversy. The Mapplethorpe and Serrano photos and exhibits were just the start of a witch hunt by conservatives eager to ferret out ideological and sexual deviation in directly and indirectly funded government art programs. Of course, this is nothing new. Political repression of art has a long history, which includes notable cases such as the destruction of Diego Rivera's murals in Rockefeller Center in the 30s, and specific blacklistings and the diffuse climate of repression of the McCarthy era. The Reagan presidency saw a gradual but decisive shift in many agencies such as the American Film Institute, National Endowment for the Humanities, Public Broadcasting System/Corporation for Public Broadcasting, as overt administrative intervention was used when needed to create a conservative mood. By the end of the decade it was not unusual to find bureaucrats openly remarking at grant writing workshops, "Of course, we don't fund anything political."

The keep-on-begging grant system for media projects extends government surveillance of projects as a bit of money appears now and later (if one is good, a little more pops out — like food pellets in behavioral conditioning experiments). This method works to create an environment of self-censorship, which is vastly more suitable to the system than using the ax directly. The National Endowments were not set up as a response to a massive democratic demand that the state

support the arts and humanities. Rather, they were foot dragging responses to the fact that other capitalist countries had entire ministries of culture which actively advanced national interests in the arts. And they have functioned, at least in part and always significantly, as vehicles for social and political control (just as the education sector does, for example).

Because there are a few exceptions, people are often tempted to forget the rule: he who pays the piper calls the tune. The public sector of arts funding under capitalism will always be liable to ideological squeeze. Witness the self-constriction and mainstreaming of England's "alternative" Channel 4, originally viewed as a godsend by British left media people. Witness the almost total blackout of Palestinean views or sex-positive AIDS information on PBS, which manages to slot a few "controversial" works into its "Point of View" series long after the issues have been well covered in the mainstream media.

Given the situation we have, what is a viable radical position? Certainly radicals need to take a stand against censorship and insist on free expression as a basic right for everyone, including artists. But radicals also have to point out the amount of tacit restriction and self-censorship that a repressive climate encourages, and to argue for opening the field of discussion, the expansion of boundaries, the inclusion of more voices, and the articulation of expression by the stigmatized and dispossessed.

Radicals should take advantage of what can be received from the existing system of media funding. But they can hardly depend on being able to "rip off the system," at least not as a regular procedure. The system isn't totally stupid about its interests. And there is certainly a point at which the desire to get something out of the dominant funding bodies crosses the boundary of buying into its values and procedures.

Radicals must remain in charge of their own artistic production and must be able to produce even if the grant money isn't there. For media artists that's a big issue because so much media work demands big bucks. Videomaker and JUMP CUT editor, Sherry Milner argues convincingly for a thrifty approach:

"Although the strategy of five years of arduous fundraising in order to spend a year making a film or tape is understandable, the time lost seems more of a hardship than the lack of money. The ability to represent ideas or issues or events without the long lag between conception and execution extends to cheap media the great benefit of immediacy...Since it is not obliged to attract huge audiences, bargain media does not have to be nice, pleasant, or well-behaved. It doesn't have to sugar-coat its intentions. Throwing aside expectations about what media should look like or what it should say, bargain media can afford to be offensive and to encourage people to take sides. But overpriced media is obliged to be polite, to avoid too many risks, and to resist challenging assumptions. Overpriced art assumes consensus, cheap art assumes commitment."

("All That Glitters...", *The Independent*, Jan-Feb. 1987)

In the short term, artists and media people need to organize against censorship and funding cuts for art. But that must be accompanied by a clear analysis of the big picture, of the entire system. There's more to do than write letters and find supportive legislators. There's media to make that questions the priorities of the dominant system, that challenges the conservative agenda by presenting alternative images and deviant narratives. And that kind of media will not get unlimited funding, no matter what the maker's previous track record.

In an insightful analysis of the censorship controversy Carole Vance observes,

"The fundamentalist attack on images and the art world must be recognized not as an improbable and silly outburst of Yahoo-ism, but as a systematic part of a rightwing political program to restore traditional social arrangements and reduce diversity. The right wing is deeply committed to symbolic politics, both in using symbols to mobilize public sentiment and in understanding that, because images do stand in for and motivate social change, the arena of representation is a real ground for struggle." ("The War on Culture," *Art in America*, Sept. 89)

Mounting an effective response calls for a politics that goes beyond free speech issues. A strategy encompassing the entire system of representation must be accompanied by diverse tactics which allow radical challenges to appear rapidly. Which is to say that radical media people have to call on their most powerful resource, one that is not handed out by granters: imagination.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)